

Tradition in Modernity : A Recipe for Vibrant Architecture by Khaled Asfour

In design practice the concept of reusing traditional forms, ideas, elements, spaces, and settings is not new. Early attempts in history has been more successful than those of our modern times. In the latter, the adoption of visual abstraction as a way of presenting tradition in modern designs is superficial. It is less successful because making forms that are abstracted from history was separated from the building program. It is a historic wrapping that has nothing or little to do with the rest of the building design. It is a nostalgic skin that evoked emotions that hardly pertain to spatial experience of the building.

The idea of reusing same components for different types of architecture in different periods is not new. It is as early as Vitruvius when he showed us how to reuse authentic architecture of the temples. In his treatise he praised the Greeks for adding rows of columns around the temple edges interpreting it as an instant message of "dignity" since the arrangement of columns in rows "gives the imposing effect" of the deity and sets to dominate the viewer with air of respect and reverence to the house of god. But when it comes to less sacred buildings columns should convey a different message. "The columns will not be subject to the same rules ... which I prescribed in the case of sanctuaries; for the dignity which ought to be their quality in temples of the gods is one thing, but their elegance in colonnades and other public works is quite another." (Vitruvius, 15BC/1914, p. 154). The dignity of the deity in a spiritual ambience is different from the elegance of a stoa colonnade in a recreational festive atmosphere. What makes the message different from one setting to another despite the same orders are used is the spatial experience surrounding them.

These insights presented by Vitruvius was further elaborated during the High -Renaissance period by Michelangelo in his redesign of piazza Campidoglio and by Palladio in his villa design. Both masters realized that if they had to reuse elements from antiquity the right mood should be considered with respect to the function of the building. By the advent of the 19th century this approach was codified by Quatremère de Quincy who made it a doctrine for the Beaux-Arts school of Paris. The result was vibrant architecture so much communicating with its surrounding culture.

In our modern times reusing tradition in contemporary design with the aim of producing vibrant architecture, as suggested by the ancients, is hardly realized. Few architects understood this approach. Herzog and de Muron created the mood "feel at home" bringing the sense of coziness and intimacy in the furniture exhibition Vitra Haus located in Weil am Rhein; Rem Koolhaas produced the atmosphere of a "living room" inside Seattle Library to get people interested in using public libraries; Behnische merged casual with formal workspace thus evoking a "live and work" environment in Unilever Haus located in Hamburg; Norman Foster infused a strong aroma of nature's delight in villa La Voile located in Cap Fêrrat; and Helmut Jahn fostered a "meet and share" sensation among scientists in Merck Serono headquarters located in Geneve.

The paper will discuss the works of those few famous architects showing their strong lineage to antiquity. Also their work will be put in contrast with the common practice of superficially reusing history as an abstract meaningless shell that has little to do with the building program.